

Kevin Giles and Jim Anderson, *Star Tribune*

The former vice president said a bridge proposal by Rep. Michele Bachmann undermines a law he co-authored in 1968 that protects rivers nationwide. Sen. Amy Klobuchar has a similar proposal.

Amending a federal law to allow a new bridge over the St. Croix River amounts to a repeal of protection for scenic rivers nationwide, said former U.S. Sen. Walter Mondale, who was a co-author of the 1968 bill that protects those waterways.

"I'm against it. This bridge as proposed should not be built," said Mondale, now a Minneapolis attorney who was President Jimmy Carter's vice president.

"I think that people ought to be soberly thinking about whether they want to assault the uniqueness and majesty of that river. This is establishing a dangerous precedent of the whole river system."

Mondale's concerns put him at odds with key Minnesota leaders -- Gov. Mark Dayton, U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar, both fellow Democrats, and U.S. Rep. Michele Bachmann, a Republican.

Never in the history of the 43-year-old law protecting the nation's most scenic rivers has Congress allowed a new bridge over one of them. But Bachmann had introduced legislation to do just that, while Klobuchar is planning similar legislation that would accomplish the same thing. Dayton recently said he also favors a new bridge.

Bachmann's bill would permit a \$690 million, four-lane bridge to cross the St. Croix just south of Stillwater, circumventing recent rulings that such a bridge would harm the river's recreational and scenic values.

Klobuchar plans to introduce legislation that would start the process of exempting the bridge from the federal law altogether, said Rose Baumann, Klobuchar's legislative director. Klobuchar, who will be in Stillwater on Friday, discussed her bill this week with U.S. Transportation Secretary Ron LaHood, who supports the plan.

Mondale was a U.S. senator when he co-authored the U.S. Wild and Scenic Rivers Act that governs the St. Croix and, now, 202 other rivers nationwide. Successful Bachmann legislation, he said Wednesday, would open the nation's other protected waterways to a torrent of building development.

"The St. Croix River is a magnificent river of national and international stature," Mondale said.

Reiterating what she said in Stillwater last week, Bachmann said Thursday: "The people of the east metropolitan area finally have a chance to build the much-needed bridge over the St. Croix River. Gov. Dayton, Sen. Klobuchar, myself and others are coming together in a bipartisan effort to get the job done."

Her bill does not remove the St. Croix from the protections of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, she said, but just clears the regulatory path.

In the history of the federal law, Congress has granted only two exemptions. Both were non-bridge changes that improved the environmental appeal of rivers in Michigan and Oregon.

Bachmann introduced a bill in 2010 that asked the U.S. secretary of the Interior to clear the project -- essentially invalidating conclusions of the National Park Service (NPS), which he oversees -- but it went nowhere. Her new bill calls for the NPS to revert to a 2005 ruling, subsequently overturned in court, that declared the bridge compatible with federal law.

U.S. Rep. Ron Kind of Wisconsin, who as a Democrat adds a bipartisan flavor to Bachmann's new bill, did not support her effort last year. But he has joined Republican Reps. Chip Cravaack of Minnesota and Sean Duffy of Wisconsin as co-sponsors this time.

"My decision reaffirms where I've been all along: We need to build a bridge sooner rather than later," Kind said. "The status quo is unsustainable."

Despite Bachmann's determination, hurdles remain. Her bill contains no federal appropriation of money, leaving two cash-strapped states, Minnesota and Wisconsin, to pay for a project that most everyone agrees will grow in cost.

Bachmann's bill pushes an expensive bridge at a time when "we're cutting budgets everywhere," Mondale said.

Transportation departments in Minnesota and Wisconsin have authority to sell bonds to cover most of their costs for the proposed bridge, although Wisconsin law specifies the state must first secure a \$75 million federal grant before bonding. A bill in that state's Legislature seeks to remove that requirement.

Under current projections, Minnesota would pay as much as \$380 million. Wisconsin would pay as much as \$310 million. The Minnesota cost is higher because of extensive approach work.

Like Bachmann, Kind said the bridge is a worthwhile investment in infrastructure that will bring jobs in the short term and economic growth for the long haul. In the past, Bachmann has been critical of infrastructure spending under President Obama's stimulus plan.

Among the 25 environmental and social action organizations that oppose the current bridge proposal -- and say they would support a smaller, less intrusive bridge -- is the Minnesota Food Association, which helps immigrant farmers grow and market their vegetables. The list also includes the National Parks Conservation Association, the St. Paul Audubon Society, and Transit for Livable Communities. Even the Sierra Club, the most visible opponent to the current proposal, has said it would support a smaller bridge to replace Stillwater's 80-year-old Lift Bridge.

To many opponents of the current plan, building a big highway-style bridge is an outdated idea. They say a new bridge should complement the nearby Interstate 94 bridge, not compete with it. They argue that a new bridge should fit with the character of the river, not clash with it.

Dan McGuinness is one of those people. McGuinness represents the St. Croix River Association, a coalition of conservationists, farmers, business owners and other residents. A new bridge should be an architectural landmark but also structurally modest, he said, and would be designed to someday accommodate light-rail mass transit and express buses.

Another proponent of a smaller bridge is Rep. Betty McCollum, D-Minn., who has vowed to fight Bachmann's bill. Building a bridge of the proposed size, she said, will cause traffic congestion as far west as Maplewood and Roseville. McCollum also questioned the wisdom of building a bridge for 18,000 commuters at a cost three times that of the new Interstate 35W bridge in Minneapolis.

Mondale, a Democrat, echoed the same concern. The proposed bridge is "a remedy that's way outsized to what the problem is" and, despite having a major interstate highway bridge just 6 miles away, will encourage traffic congestion on roads for miles in every direction, he said.